
Henrietta Szold

1860-1945, BALTIMORE CITY

... the lady from Baltimore who became Israel's mother.

It was 1933, and the Jewish children on the boats to Palestine were alone and terribly frightened. Leaving their homeland of Germany, many did not fully realize the extent of their journey or the irretrievable loss of family, friends, and everything they had ever known. Their parents were desperate to save them from a Nazi regime that threatened to destroy them.

When they arrived in the land that would become the new Israel, a gentle woman, Henrietta Szold, lovingly greeted each one, speaking their names, hugging their weary bodies, tending to their needs, and banishing their fears. Innocent and naive, they could not yet know they were special, chosen, spared; indeed, no one at the time fully comprehended that a million Jewish children left behind would soon face torture and death.

"In every generation, in every land, among every people, unique personalities have been born who are destiny marked, leaving an imprint on time and on history. Henrietta Szold was of this noble community" (Freund). The words of Miriam Freund¹⁰ echo the sentiments of countless others, both in the United States and Israel. Henrietta Szold, with her vision and foresight, created the night school program in America; she was also the founder of Hadassah, the largest women's volunteer organization in the world. Her extraordinary efforts helped to create medical centers, social welfare programs, and schools of nursing in Israel. At seventy-four, in response to the ominous rise of the Nazi regime in Germany, she worked tirelessly to evacuate Jews from Europe to Palestine (which became modern Israel in 1948). Because of her extraordinary efforts, some thirteen thousand children survived the Holocaust.

The daughter of a rabbi, Henrietta Szold was born in Baltimore. Under her father, she began studying Hebrew and Jewish history at an early age (Levin 1). As she learned, she became deeply and emotionally rooted in Jewish tradition. Throughout those influential years, she developed an insatiable thirst for knowledge, which would be combined with an equal determination to act on behalf of her people.

Szold's first contribution came during the great immigration of Russian Jews from anti-Semitic Russia after 1882. Most unable to speak English, many refugees arrived in Baltimore to find their employment opportunities limited to fourteen to sixteen hours of daily labor in sweatshops. Szold, knowing that education would help them secure better jobs and ascend the economic ladder, started a night school. On the first night, thirty people attended. By the light of an oil lamp, Szold began teaching English, American history, and law and she prepared her students for citizenship. Six years later, more than five thousand immigrants from all over Europe had attended Szold's school (Stayn).

Working with refugees enriched and motivated Szold. Personal contact with these displaced persons, combined with the historical pattern of persecution and degradation of Jews, convinced her of the need to establish a Jewish homeland in Palestine. "I became converted to Zionism¹¹ at the very moment that I realized that it alone supplied my bruised, torn and bloody nation, my distracted nation, with an ideal.."(Freund).



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*Working on plans
for a Kibbutz in
Israel, 1941*

Germany to set up the Youth Aliyah (Hebrew for "coming up"), an organization dedicated to helping Jewish youth escape Germany. Later that year, the first group of bewildered children arrived by boat in Palestine, and in subsequent years, thousands more were saved.

Szold never returned to Baltimore. She died in 1945, three years before the State of Israel was born. "Make my eyes look toward the future" was one of her favorite sayings; it was a philosophy that guided her life: today's vision and work will realize tomorrow's reality (Stayn). Szold is remembered today as the lady from Baltimore who became Israel's mother.

Szold once wrote an elegiac essay in memory of a beloved friend, and the eloquent words of that essay capture the sentiments so many had for Szold herself:

To such as she was we say nofarewell. The harmony of their being has stolen into the fibre of our consciousness. In part we are what we are because they have lived. In part we do what we do and as we do it, because they have done as they did. Remembering what they were and what they did, what she was and what she did, we consecrate our lives to life—life—full, complete, harmonious. #

In 1893, Szold gave up teaching to become the literary secretary of the Jewish Publication Society in Philadelphia, where she was an editor, writer, and translator for some twenty books. One of her more impressive contributions during this period was the revised translation of the *History of the Jews*.¹²

In 1909, Szold left her native America on a difficult journey to Palestine. There she witnessed severe poverty, rampant disease, and poor medical care, all leading to a shockingly high death rate. She was inspired to act (Stayn). Upon returning to the United States, Szold founded and became the first president of Hadassah (1912). Soon, this organization was sending doctors, nurses, medical equipment, and supplies to Palestine. A time of extreme crisis, thirty-nine thousand immigrants had arrived in Palestine in one year alone.

In 1933, Szold, then in her seventies, wanted to retire to Baltimore,¹³ but with the rise of Hitler and his plan for extermination of the Jews, she recognized her duty and moral responsibility. With Jewish survival at stake, she actually traveled to

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